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Changing Homeland Security: The Issue-Attention Cycle

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Changing Homeland Security: The Issue-Attention Cycle

Christopher Bellavita

Abstract

The July 7, 2005 attacks on London inescapably direct public attention to our own transportation system. But eventually – as happened after the Madrid bombings in 2004 – public vigilance will wane. This can be seen as an affirmation of the profound trust Americans place in their public safety professionals. It is also the natural dynamic of the Issue Attention cycle, in which certain issues follow a predictable five stage process: pre-problem, alarmed discovery, awareness of the costs of making significant progress, gradual decline of intense public interest, and a post-problem stage. Before the London attacks, Homeland Security was on the cusp of the fifth and last stage. Unless the U.S. is attacked again, we will continue into Stage Five once the waves from the London bombing recede. In the absence of an active national consensus that terrorists are a clear and present threat to the lives of average Americans, the dynamics of the Issue-Attention Cycle are as inevitable as the seasons.

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The July 7, 2005 attacks on London inescapably direct public attention to our own transportation system. Everyone getting on a bus or train will look a little more carefully at objects that seem out of place or at people who look a bit suspicious. Public officials will call for more equipment, more people, and more spending for transportation security. It happened in the U.S. after the Madrid bombings in 2004. But eventually – as also happened after Madrid – public attention and vigilance will wane. Transportation security advocates will again have to battle for resources against competing homeland security interests.

The attacks in Madrid and London illustrate Homeland Security's slide from the apex of the national domestic policy agenda into the mundane world of grants, bureaucracy and interest groups. But this is not a bad thing. It is an affirmation of the profound trust Americans continue to place in their public safety professionals. It is also the natural dynamic of the Issue-Attention cycle.

More than 30 years ago, Anthony Downs wrote about a cycle that affects many domestic public policy problems.¹ Downs argued that certain issues follow a predictable five stage process: pre-problem, alarmed discovery, awareness of the costs of making significant progress, gradual decline of intense public interest, and the post problem stage. Before the London attacks, homeland security was on the cusp of Stage Five. After the attacks, it revisited Stage Two. Before too many months pass, it is likely to recall the difficulties of Stage Three, make a brief return trip through Stage Four, and – if there are no more attacks – settle into Stage Five.

We have been at war with the terrorists since September 11, 2001. They have been at war with us since October 23, 1983, when 241 U.S. service members were killed in Lebanon. During the almost 20 years before the nation formally joined the Terrorism Wars, homeland security was in Stage One of the Issue-Attention Cycle: the pre-problem stage. A relatively small group of people were alarmed by the rising threat of terrorism. As has been well documented in the post 9/11 era, most of those calls to pay attention were ignored.

After the pre-problem phase comes Stage Two: Alarmed Discovery and a euphoric enthusiasm to do something quickly about the problem. Alarmed Discovery is triggered by an especially dramatic event, such as September 11th. At this point, the rest of the nation discovers – or in the case of the London bombings, recalls – the problem. Political leaders rise up to demand and to oversee an immediate solution. They are driven by a can-do ethos that asserts no problem is too big or complex to be solved. We just need to get the right people working together as a team, come up with a plan, and simply fix the problem. Stage Two of the Cycle is characterized both by shock and by the unyielding confidence that we can do something to right the wrongs that allowed the problem to happen.

After September 11th, we saw the largest reorganization of the national government in over half a century. We allocated rivers of money to homeland security, even taking away funds from other public safety programs. Interestingly, very few states and cities – with the notable exceptions of New York City, Washington D.C., and a few other cities – made such dramatic structural or resource changes. This was an early signal that perhaps

most of the country is not as concerned about homeland security as are the jurisdictions with the most vulnerable targets

In Stage Three of the Cycle, there is a growing awareness of the costs of making significant progress. The nation has not been attacked in almost four years. We have spent more than 100 billion dollars on homeland security. Hundreds of thousands of people have now added “homeland security” to their job responsibilities.

Even so, books, articles and reports continue to point out how vulnerable our borders, ports, transportation systems, schools, public health, food supply, chemical industry, and infrastructure are to terrorist attacks. Our spending and our programs focus mostly on preparing to respond more effectively and efficiently to the next attack. We still do not have a national plan to prevent terrorism. We do not even have a shared vocabulary for prevention.

The executive branch of the national government is embarking on a multi-year effort to convince states and cities to obey the expanding dictates of Homeland Security Presidential Direction (HSPD) 8 if they want to continue to receive homeland security funding. More than one city is quietly doing the benefit cost analysis to determine whether getting homeland security money is worth the organizational and other costs to satisfy grant requirements. State legislatures are becoming aware that the national government expects them eventually to pick up a substantial share of homeland security spending. The private sector continues to balk at systematically collaborating with government to reduce critical infrastructure vulnerabilities. These are all Stage Three artifacts of the Issue-Attention cycle.

By Stage Four, the public – including public leaders– gradually loses interest in the problem. Some people become discouraged about how long it is going to take to “solve” the problem. Others become bored with it or move on to other, more immediately pressing, concerns.

There is substantial evidence that public interest in the terrorism problem has waned since 2001. In October 2001, 85% of Americans thought the next attack was imminent. In June 2005, a USA Today/CNN/Gallup poll reported that 64% of Americans believed we would not be attacked anytime soon.

Most Americans have little concern that they or their families will be victims of terrorism. A January 2005 CNN/USA Today/Gallup Poll found 90% of adults believed the chances of a terrorist attack in their community was “not too likely,” or “not at all likely.” In a May 2005 CBS poll, only 7% of adults nationwide thought terrorism was the most important national problem. A June 2005 ABC News/Washington Post poll reported only 12% of adults in the country believed the U.S. campaign against terrorism should be the top priority for the Bush Administration. The economy, the Iraq war, health care, and social security all ranked higher. Of the college seniors and graduates surveyed in 2005, only 13% were afraid of terrorism. Significantly larger majorities feared going into debt and being unemployed.²

Stage Five of the Cycle is the Post Problem Stage. The issue moves behind the public scenes and becomes the grist for homeland security’s congressional, industrial, academic, and bureaucratic Complex. The professionals who populate that Complex develop and refine the strategies, programs and institutions formed in response to Alarmed Discovery.

Before July 7, 2005 we were on the cusp of Stage Five. Unless the U.S. is attacked again, we will continue into Stage Five once the waves from the London bombing recede. The American public is generally comfortable with the amount of attention government gives to homeland security. More than half the adults polled in a May 2005 NBC News/Wall Street Journal survey thought the national government was placing just the right amount of emphasis – not too much, not too little – on both homeland security and terrorism.

There are several reasons why a diminished public interest in homeland security is not a problem. For one thing, in the absence of an active national consensus that terrorists are a clear and present threat to the lives of average Americans, the dynamics of the Issue-Attention Cycle are as inevitable as the seasons. Homeland security has matured sufficiently to join the routine of public policy.

There is no particular reason why homeland security has to be the number one priority for America. Half the American people polled in the summer of 2004 thought we were safer now than we were on September 11th. Half thought we were not.

Clearly there are some states and cities where the threat of terrorism is not a theoretical exercise. They have people living in their communities who wish harm to our nation. They house targets which if attacked could kill hundreds of thousands of people or cause massive disruptions to the national economy.

But there are other communities where tornadoes, hurricanes, gangs, or methamphetamines are more immediate threats. In a world where you cannot do everything, these communities have chosen – by how they spend their money and attention – to manage the risks they can do something about, and to accept the risk of Al Qaeda-style and domestic terrorism. In the absence of any additional terrorist attacks, expect to see more communities join this group.

At a Spring 2005 conference of state legislators and judges, only two out of forty public officials attending a homeland security panel indicated that homeland security was one of their top concerns. As one legislator said, they have faith that the public safety professionals charged with securing the homeland are doing their jobs. “If they’re not,” he said, “then we need to get people in there who will.”

One recent June evening, Interstate 5 near the bucolic and largely unpopulated California-Oregon border was shut down for several hours. Someone had reported a suspicious box by the side of the freeway, under the “Welcome to California” sign. The box turned out to be the remains of an unknown person – ghastly enough, but nothing worse. This very minor incident involved the citizen who reported the box, law enforcement agencies, and other public safety agencies from two states that responded, collaborated, and communicated to resolve the issue. In the pre-September 11th world, it is likely the box would have stayed unnoticed until the next time the highway was cleaned.

Today, all over the country, agencies that had no history of working together are creating a new history. Government and private sector workers are more attuned to what is around them. Law enforcement officials who complained about never getting any information are now complaining about getting too much. That is progress.

We have only begun this epochal marathon called homeland security. There is much to criticize about the pace, philosophy, and means of making the nation safer. In a sense, it is disappointing that we need an attack on British subways and busses to generate more attention for our own transportation system. Homeland security has lost its prominence as an issue that rivets the imagination of an easily distracted public. But the terrorist threat remains real. And the magnitude of the work that remains to be done grows geometrically as knowledge about our vulnerabilities increases.

The Issue-Attention Cycle continues. The post problem stage of the Cycle becomes Version 2.0 of a new pre-problem stage. Anyone paying attention can hear homeland security specialists worrying about ports, public health, food supply vulnerabilities, and more.

The country will be attacked again – next month, next year, or in the next decade. After the Alarmed Discovery that follows the attack, there will be another period of “euphoric enthusiasm” to dramatically change what we are doing now. Here is where homeland security’s issue-attention cycle may depart from the conceptual template. Some of the “dramatic changes” that follow a horrendous attack could reshape forever, and in historically undesirable ways, the American ethos. It is the job of homeland security professionals to prevent that next attack. When the attack does happen, their job will be to remedy what has not worked. It will also be to hold on to the ideals that make our nation a unique experiment in world history.

Prevention means more than just preventing the next attack. It also means preventing the consequences of terrorism from turning us into the Lord of the Flies. The path of that cycle is dark.

¹Anthony Downs, “Up and Down With Ecology: The ‘Issue-Attention Cycle,’” *The Public Interest*, 28 (Summer 1972): 38-50.

² See summary of polling data at <http://www.pollingreport.com/terror.htm>. Greg Toppo, “Graduates fear debt more than terrorism,” *USA Today*; May 19, 2005.